

# Psychiatric Clinics from Around the World



## Snapshot of Air Force Psychiatry: Wilford Hall Medical Center

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In line with *Psychiatry 2009's* mission to strengthen its global presence as a leading source of evidence-based information for practicing clinicians, we are pleased to launch the new column, "Psychiatric Clinics from Around the World." This series will enable readers to become familiar with facilities around the world that provide psychiatric care. We hope you find the column interesting. We start the series with a column featuring Wilford Hall Medical Center, the flagship psychiatric facility of the United States Air Force.

### ABSTRACT

United States Air Force psychiatry plays a vital role in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan). Outside of the military, little is known about US Air Force psychiatry and the Wilford Hall Medical Center. Wilford Hall Medical Center is the US Air Force's flagship hospital and premiere psychiatric hospital. This article briefly discusses the history of Wilford Hall Medical Center and its psychiatric contributions to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

### KEY WORDS

Wilford Hall Medical Center, Air Force psychiatry, military medicine, military psychiatry

At the start of World War II, the military recruited some of the nation's top medical specialists to serve their country. However, soon after the war ended, many of these physicians left the service when their commitment ended. In 1946, Col. Floyd Wergeland proposed the establishment of military graduate medical education programs (GME) to stimulate recruitment of future physicians. The proposal was subsequently implemented by Col. Raymond Duke in 1947, who was the Director of Education and Training at the Office of the Surgeon General.<sup>1</sup>

The Air Force's largest Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME)-accredited general psychiatry residency training program (approved in 1962) is located at Wilford Hall Medical Center on Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.<sup>2</sup> WHMC is the flagship medical center of the US Air Force. WHMC was founded on November 16, 1957. It is the US Air

Force's largest medical facility, with a staff of 4,500 and a maximum capacity of more than 1,000 beds.<sup>2</sup> WHMC is one of three level-one trauma centers in San Antonio, serving the local community as well as South Central Texas. Its psychiatry residency program is merged with the University of Texas Health Sciences Center at San Antonio. This psychiatry residency training program offers unique training opportunities not seen in nonmilitary institutions. In addition to the mission of providing mental healthcare to service members, retirees, and their families, US Air Force psychiatrists are trained in occupational (military) psychiatry, such as performing fitness-for-duty evaluations, interpreting appropriate Department of Defense and Air Force directives on mental health issues, and providing mental health services to deployed personnel in austere locations.<sup>3</sup>

WHMC has the larger of two inpatient psychiatry units in the US Air Force.<sup>2</sup> Patient populations hospitalized on the inpatient unit include (but are not limited to) basic trainees (age 18–30) who often develop first-break psychotic symptoms, deployed soldiers medically evacuated from Iraq and Afghanistan for mental health symptoms, and individuals suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder.

This facility also has the US Air Force's largest outpatient mental health clinic and its only inpatient psychiatry consultation-liaison service. The faculty also currently consists of forensic-, child/adolescent-, and geriatric-fellowship-trained psychiatrists.<sup>4</sup> WHMC has the US Air Force's largest psychology training program, creating a unique collaboration between the disciplines in the arenas of education, research, and patient care. WHMC is often tasked with deployment orders for its psychiatrists. At any one time, 10 to 50 percent of the US Air Force staff psychiatrists stationed at WHMC are deployed in support of military missions to Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite these shortages, GME and patient care missions at WHMC continue uninterrupted.

In a nutshell, US Air Force psychiatry, born out of the necessities of World War II, has evolved to offer a unique blend GME training, patient care, and support to the military mission in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

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